

## THEMATIC ISSUES AND APPLICATION OF THEORY IN LITERARY STUDIES

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study paper aims to present research practice in literary studies, a distinct course of study of literature in humanities and social sciences. Researchers select a text (e.g. a novel), raise a thematic issue in the text, and then explore a theory related to that issue. They apply that theory in the text and analyses the thematic issue with reference to that text. They are mostly dependent on secondary resources for the analysis. This paper presents overall concept and practices in researches, use of theory in thematic analysis in literary studies.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Research, Literary Studies, Theory, Thematic Issues, Thematic Analysis*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Research is area of interest for every academicians though areas of researches are different in academics. Lab researcher is engaged in experiments to explore, justify and explain their hypothesis. Scientists and technologists are engaged for exploration and discoveries of all kinds of equipments, medicines, etc. Researchers belonging to humanities and social sciences visit fields for primary data which are, in turn, used for analysis, interpretation, and discussion and finding results. They believe that primary data are more reliable and more productive than secondary data. Meanwhile, researchers in literary studies are much more dependent on secondary data resources for theory, analysis and findings. They work on thesis or dissertation, thesis essay, and term paper with secondary resources and use theory for analysis. This paper addresses the common practice of researches, thematic issues and application of theory in literary studies.

#### **Terminology: Theory**

The word 'Theory' had origin in late 16th century. It denoted a mental scheme or something to be done. The word was derived from Latin *theoria*, from ancient Greek *theoria*, which meant contemplation or speculation, or *theoreo* with the meanings of view, consider or examine. (NOED, 1998; Wikipedia)

Theory denotes concepts by which one can develop knowledge of events, or things, with their variables. Theory is a systematic conceptual framework which guides researchers to relate variables, explain and predict the phenomena. Theory is a hypothesis or an assumption assumed for the sake of argument or investigation or analysis. It is an abstract thought or speculation which is used for the purpose of analyzing a discourse or exploring an issue.

Theory is a generalized concept, a general view, a general thought. A. Gabriel writes in his article that a systematic review of pertinent literature provides the understanding that a theory is a generalised statement of abstractions or ideas that asserts, explains or predicts relationships or connections between or among phenomena, within the limits of critical bounding assumptions that the theory explicitly makes (Gabriel, 2008). K. Glanz remarks that the generalised

statement brings together ideas, “interrelated concepts, definitions, and propositions that explain or predict events or situations by specifying relations among variables” (Glanz, 2008, p. 114). H. B. Asher writes that the ideas, concepts and themes constitute a deep and broad base of knowledge in the discipline – which constitutes the theory. These ideas, concepts, and themes together comprise the theory, which enables us to explain the meaning, nature, relationships, and challenges asserted, or predicted to be associated with a phenomenon in an educational or social sciences context, so that an application of those attributes of the theory enables us to understand the phenomenon and to act more appropriately (Asher, 1984), including ability to predict. In line with this understanding, Kerlinger and Lee (2000, p. 11) define a theory in the following words,

A theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena.

Their definition mentions three major aspects of a theory: (1) a theory is a set of propositions consisting of defined and interrelated constructs, (2) a theory sets out the interrelations among a set of variables (constructs), and in so doing, presents a systematic view of the phenomena described by the variables, and (3) a theory explains phenomena. (Kivunja, 2018)

Kivunja writes that a theory usually emerges from a long process of research that uses empirical data to make assertions based on deductive and inductive analysis of the data. Overtime, and on the basis of clearly stated assumptions, the observations from the research produce results that converge on findings about relationships, and these enable the researcher to formulate the core propositions from which the abstract theory is then generalised. The theory that emerges provides an intellectual, research-grounded basis for understanding, applying, analysing, and designing new ways to investigate relationships and to solve problems in educational and social sciences contexts. The assumptions, assertions, and predictions of relationships postulated by a theory become an intellectual base upon which research data can be grounded to search for meaning in future studies. The predictions in the theory can provide reason for research into problems that hitherto have not been investigated. They help researchers to consider what is important and critical in understanding real-life situations, as postulated by the theory, and how our knowledge and understanding of contexts in education and the social sciences can be used to explain behaviour and to solve problems. (Kivunja, 2018)

In literature, the term ‘theory’ is often used for the purpose of analysis. Theory is used to describe the meanings, themes, assumptions, and other aspects of a literary discourse. Theory is a guide to literary study. Theory and criticism are two different concepts. Theory is required for analysis of particular literary texts. These two frequently overlap because every act of criticism rests, consciously or unconsciously, upon a theory like poststructuralism, feminism, hermeneutics, new historicism, deconstruction, etc.

The movements of theory building and writing criticism upon literary texts have been all through generation after generation, from Plato to the present day theory builders and critiques, all focusing on the way in which language shapes and orders not only the experience of literature but the totality of human experience. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers advocated views over language and these views encouraged many theories like structuralism, neo-structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, etc. These advocates of linguistic theory have cultivated an acutely critical view of the assumptions underlying traditional criticism, assumptions that include the idea of the author, the makeup of the canon, the nature of narrative, the roles of gender, class, and race, and the definition of literature. With the origin and development of the criticism, theory has given birth to a number of schools of thoughts, with various terminologies and cultural and political agenda.

Theory is an abstract thing, say, Newton's theory of gravitational attraction, Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection, or Rawls's theory of justice as fairness. Theory discovers significant commonalities regardless of the actual scientific and scholarly practices underlying these theories. Theory is built upon the shared understandings, concepts and knowledge. Analytical interpretation, speculative evaluation, and explanatory justification are practiced with combination of theory and practice in critique's profession. Theory has the potential capacity to provide the readers with the conceptual tools to read meaning and intent into their own and others' actions and the possible effects of those actions on themselves and others. There is relationship between theories and world views as well. World views are bases for formation of theories.

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, in their book *A Theory of Literature* (1942), argued for the superiority of the intrinsic over what they described as "the most widespread and flourishing methods of studying literature... its setting, its environment, its external causes." "A Theory of Literature" gave way to Theory, and with it, the intrinsic to the extrinsic. Samuel Taylor Coleridge developed his theory of literature, a theory in which Nature appears as the Absolute. Coleridge's conception regarding nature and imagination assumed a dominant place in 19th-century as a literary theory.

Jacques Derrida was the major exponent of deconstruction. He criticized western thought for operating on the basis of logocentrism, the belief that there exists an absolute, a "logos" that transcends the limitations of language. Noam Chomsky developed his theory in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957). In its historical development, composition studies has been closely allied to, and in some cases identical with, rhetoric. Like rhetoric, it is both a practical and a theoretical discipline. Its theoretical character has been complicated by the introduction of various branches of recent theory, including cultural studies, feminism, and poststructuralism. As in literary study, these theoretical perspectives have brought about profound changes in composition's self-definition and sense of purpose. (Quinn, 2006)

### **Critical Theory and Literary Theory**

Criticism is a general term for the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literature. One aspect of criticism—the examination of its underlying assumptions and the presentation of its principles and procedures—is characterized as literary theory, which has assumed increasing importance in literary study since the 1960s. Darwin's evolutionary theory received a wide range of criticism in English discourse. Ecocriticism examines environmental issues. It is an approach to literature from the perspective of environmentalism. For example, Earnest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* is a novel on environmentalism and it is analysed with the theory of ecocriticism.

We must know the truth that theory is not data, facts, typologies, taxonomies, or empirical findings. A collection of facts is not a theory, just as a pile of stones is not a house. Likewise, a collection of constructs (e.g., a typology of constructs) is not a theory, because theories must go well beyond constructs to include propositions, explanations, and boundary conditions. Data, facts, and findings operate at the empirical (experience is the basis of all knowledge. Empiricism is closely allied to the scientific method in that they both employ the principle of inductive reasoning—moving from the particular to the general—as their logical basis.) or observational level, while theories operate at a conceptual level and are based on logic rather than observations. Some criteria for building up a theory are: logical consistency (a theory assumes rationality), explanatory power, falsifiability (the theory is potentially disprovable), parsimony (how much of a phenomenon is explained with how few variables). (Chapter-4-theories-in-scientific-research)

### Thematic Issues in Literary Studies

Most often readers look for theme in a literary text. Theme is a significant idea which is a target for every reader, student and teacher. It is connected with the writer's intention and sometimes used interchangeably with motif. We ask a frequent question- what does the writer intend to say to the readers? This is the very thing that we concentrate on for analysis because it stands as an issue for discussion.

We apply reading to the experience of life, because a writer shares his or her experience with readers, and that is world's experience, and that is life's experience, which appears to be indispensable to understanding literature. This is particularly true in contemporary literature, in which plot and character are often obscure, while theme offers a consistent thread through which the reader can unify the narrative.

Criticism is practiced on many aspects of a literary text: style, strategy, themes (related to culture, society, economics, politics, etc.), experiences, emotive factors, aesthetic factors, etc. Thematic issues are most preferable topics for criticism and researches in literary studies. Thematic criticism is also known as "Thematics". Love, death, life, time, gender or racial discrimination, struggle (for social status, political status, etc.), good and evil, adultery, beliefs, identities, ideology, power, psychology, wills (like free will), existence, mobilization, imagination, negotiation, performativity, masculinity or femininity, failure or success, psychic

Disidentification, pains and pangs, politics of location, loss and renunciation, secrecy, murder, diseases, exploitation, suppression, age, aids, alienation, and anti-Semitism, etc. are some examples of themes. Some of the important examples of thematic criticism include Georges Bataille's *Literature and Evil* (1973), Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1979), and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). A perceptive overview is Russell Brown's "Theme" in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, edited by Irena Makaryk (1993). *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, edited by Werner Sollors (1993), is a collection of essays on theory and practice. (Quinn, 2006 )

### Application of Theory in Literary Studies

Researches in literary studies are mostly with secondary resources. Researchers study books, former researches and journals. A researcher reads a novel, searches a theory from different secondary resources and then applies this theory during analysis of the novel. Theory often deals with subjects that seem at best only peripherally related to what we think of as literature, but some of its insights have provided us with new tools to understand the processes of reading, writing, interpreting, and also enjoying literature. (Quinn, 2006 )

Theories are applied in all kinds of researches. Even lab researcher applies a theory in his/her experiment. A theory is an explanation of a natural or social behavior, event, or phenomenon. In formal way if presented, a scientific theory is a system of constructs (concepts) and propositions (relationships between those constructs) that collectively presents a logical, systematic, and coherent explanation of a phenomenon of interest within some assumptions and boundary conditions (Bacharach 1989). In literature, there are hardly other options for analytical research. Application of theory is the best and foremost approach to researches in literary studies. Theory helps with a logical, systematic, and coherent explanation of a phenomenon of interest in a literary text.

Application of theory is beneficial in research. Among some of the benefits, first is that a theory provides the underlying logic of the occurrence of natural or social phenomenon by explaining what are the key drivers and key outcomes of the target phenomenon and why, and what underlying processes are responsible driving that phenomenon. Second is that a theory aids in sense or meaning-making by helping us synthesize prior empirical findings within a theoretical framework and reconcile contradictory findings by discovering contingent factors influencing the relationship between two constructs in different studies. Third is that the theory provides guidance for future research by helping to identify constructs and relationships which are worthy of further research. Fourth is that the theory can contribute to cumulative knowledge building by bridging gaps between other theories and by causing existing theories to be reevaluated in a new light. (Chapter-4-theories-in-scientific-research)

Though there are many benefits of theory application, they have some limitations. As theory is merely an assumption, the explanation may turn to be inaccurate. As simplified explanations of reality, theories may not always provide adequate explanations of the phenomenon of interest based on a limited set of constructs and relationships. Theories are designed to be simple and parsimonious explanations, while reality may be significantly more complex. (Chapter-4-theories-in-scientific-research)

Theory helps us with better understanding of a phenomenon. Theory is a model or framework for observation and understanding, which shapes both what we see and how we see it. Theory allows the researcher to make links between the abstract and the concrete; the theoretical and the empirical; thought statements and observational statements etc. Theory is a generalised statement that asserts a connection between two or more types of phenomena – any generalised explanatory principle. Theory is a system of interconnected abstractions or ideas that condenses and organises knowledge about the world. Theory explains and predicts the relationship between variables. ( The Importance of Related Theories and Concepts )

Theory guides research and organises its ideas. The analogy of bricks lying around haphazardly in the brickyard: ‘facts’ of different shapes and sizes have no meaning unless they are drawn together in a theoretical or conceptual framework. Theory becomes stronger as more supporting evidence is gathered; and it provides a context for predictions. Theory has the capacity to generate new research. Theory is empirically relevant and always tentative. (The Importance of Related Theories and Concepts )

### **Theory and Thematic Analysis in Literary Studies**

The following part deals with a thesis essay prepared and submitted, by Srijana Sharma, to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. (Sharma, 2020) Some extracts of the thesis essay are quoted and analysed here for the concerned readers so they can observe how they use theory in thematic analysis in literary studies. In the abstract, she writes,

This research seeks to explore, by the means of blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, the events of Vietnam War is outlined in Tim O’ Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. Taking theoretical insights on Historiographic Metafiction as proposed by Linda Hutcheon with supporting postulate from Patricia Waugh, the study reveals how this historical fiction treats the concept of historiography differently. That meant, the history of Vietnam War is analyzed from the perception of US veterans including Vietnamese civilian going beyond the mainstream of American literary writings and official history. It is an experimental fiction, which highlights the role of narrativization while depicting the incidence of war where the torment is explicitly portrayed in paradoxical way within adjoining series of stories. Furthermore, it tends the reader to observe history from present context so that, it can be scrutinized from multiple approaches or view-point

Sharma reads Tim O' Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) which has historical events of Vietnam War outlined. She has to analyse these historical events of Vietnam War and, for that purpose, she takes theoretical insights of *Historiographic Metafiction* of Linda Hutcheon (1988) and Patricia Waugh (1984). Readers need to understand what theoretical insights are given in theories like structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, feminism, Marxism, modernism, postmodernism, etc. Sharma learns first theoretical insights on *Historiographic Metafiction* and then these insights are used in different phenomena mentioned in the fiction *The Things They Carried*. She mentions,

O' Brien is narrating his own life incidents adding imaginary stories adjoining American Infantry's duty and responsibilities that they need to perform with the uncertainty of life, the interconnected short stories, historical fiction, can be explored as a *Historiographic Metafiction* because it depicts the history of Vietnam War in fictional form through diverse perception which is an output of the Cold-War. This fiction was published in 1990, since it is a postmodern fiction, it blurs the boundary of fact and fiction because 'history has become more literary and the literature more historicized' as the consequent of the world wars, genocides, mass-massacre, civil wars, global wars including nuclear explosion in the postmodern period of 20th century.

The above insights include 'boundary of fact and fiction' in *Historiographic Metafiction*, of Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh. This theory assumes that 'history has become more literary and the literature more historicized'. For her essay, her target is Vietnam War and American involvement in this war, and how this war has been described in history- is it merged with fact and fiction? The researcher's intention is clear but it is necessary to go ahead in the thesis to see how she manages to find in the fiction the novelist's efforts of presenting fact and truth both merged.

She writes that O' Brien is narrating his own life incidents and he adds imaginary stories adjoining American Infantry's duty and responsibilities that they need to perform with the uncertainty of life. She says that the fiction can be explored as a *Historiographic Metafiction* because it depicts the history of Vietnam War in fictional form through diverse perception which is an output of the Cold-War.

In Sharma's reading, "Historiographic Metafiction term introduced by Linda Hutcheon usefully coined to point self- reflexive commentary on the means and possibility of the historical representation that we see in many contemporary texts". O' Brien depicts his self- reflexivity, experiences and the feeling as an infantry in a war; meanwhile, he also represents the historically signified events. She mentions that literature is the reflection of society that also acquires contextual historicity. The fiction *The Things They Carried* has contextual historicity.

Sharma reads that Brien goes against the official history and tends to reach out the possible discernment by the means of this fiction. He doesn't claim that any established facts are either actually truth or false, and also doesn't claim his writings as the fact but freed the readers to think of their own conscious interpretation. *Historiographic Metafiction* was the term introduced by Linda Hutcheon in "A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction" during 1980s. It refers to the work of fiction which contains the elements of metafiction like parody, self- reflexivity, intertextuality, pastiches, non-linear narratives etc. in historical novel. In postmodernism, historical novel is written in the form of *Historiographic Metafiction* where the truth and reality aren't considered as the main aspects; rather subjectivity, context, ex-centrism and interpretation matter most and the knowledge that a reader gains from multiple vision is important. In her thesis, she analyses one event with the theory *Historiographic Metafiction* in the following way,

### **In this Collection of Interrelated Short Stories, O' Brien Writes:**

In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into chopper that took him way. Afterward they burned Than Khe. They marched until dusk, then dug their holes and that night Kiowa kept explaining how you had to be there, how fast it was, how the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete. Boom-down, he said. Like cement. (6) (Sharma's citing from the fiction)

In the following extract, O' Brien describes traumatic experiences of war where infantries used to meet fatal death. When the platoon of Alfa Company were in search operation in a tunnel, one of the members named Ted Lavender was shot in head, the poor guy was unable to feel the pain of being killed just in one second: the sound Boom and then he fell down and died. After the death of Lavender, the Commander Jimmy Cross ordered to blaze the village Than Khe wholly. This fact is merely flashed out in official history or about the atrocity of US strategies to overcome the war where poor civilians were excessively tortured. Poor innocent people were killed at the cost of death of infantries including fire on paddy, house and livestock. These incidents of the inhumane acts are shown in the fiction in the form of imaginative short stories collection.

According to Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological." (209) (Sharma's citing from Hutcheon's book) Here, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern fiction assists to re-write the past events in fictional form or history be re-presented from new vision to gain access at present to all. History should not be concluded with a fixity, rather be interpreted from multiple readings, that's why the shadowed or neglected parts can be in frontline. To eliminate the shortcoming of historical reading, postmodern conceptualizes historiography is needed to be re-read from multiple aspects, so that marginalized and downtrodden can also be included in history and it should be open for multiple interpretation without giving a conclusion. Hence, in order to point out the exclusion, Historiographic Metafiction tends to access historicity with open ended-ness including fiction whereby it can represent the thoughts of commoners or sufferers.

Sharma analyses the fiction, analyzing different events given in the fiction, by applying the theory Historiographic Metafiction and its insights, for thematic analysis in her thesis essay.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

It is good to suggest that literature was the term for all kinds of literary works until 18<sup>th</sup> century but it came to be a general term in researches of all areas of academic knowledge, quite different from the term 'literary studies', which is study of literature, in real traditional sense of literature, in the present time. Researchers in literary studies are habitually taking secondary data resources for theory, analysis and findings. Theory is indispensable for all kinds of researches- style, strategy, theme, etc. They use theory necessarily for thematic analysis.



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